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AUTHOR MacDonald, Susan Peck
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ABSTRACT

Academic writing is distinguished by its being a problem solving activity, no matter how tentative the solutions. In this regard, writing about literature is a form of academic writing that shares the same assumptions as other academic writing. The problem solving activity of the literary interpreter consists of discovering, preserving, or creating complexity. While the scientist's goal may be to solve or reduce problems, the literary interpreter's goal is to preserve problems, playing with them in such a way as to preserve the importance of the text. And, unlike scientific problems that are publicly discernible, limited in number, communal, and generalizable, the problems available to the literary interpreter are comparatively undefined. If there is a continuum within academic writing from defined to undefined problems, future research on composing needs to examine whether the predefined and well-defined problems of certain kinds of writing alter the nature of the composing process. (HOD)

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PROBLEM DEFINITION IN ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AND OTHER ACADEMIC WRITING

Susan Peck MacDonald
English Department
Eastern Connecticut State University
Willimantic, Connecticut 06226

Paper presented at CCCC, Minneapolis, March 1985

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English departments have always had great influence upon how writing was conceived of and taught, and that influence is now being extended through writing-across-the-curriculum programs and the new interest in mapping the world of discourse that can be found in recent composition research. Curiously, however, our own English department writing has not received as much scrutiny as might be expected. Despite the proliferation of current theories about literary interpretation, most literary theorists still consider interpretation as something that might be mental, oral, or written--as if thinking, talking about, and writing something were all interchangeable. Thus while literary theories have much to say about what readers go through in reading and then constructing interpretations of literary works, theories of interpretation do not deal either with the process of writing an interpretation or with the nature of the final written product. In our profession, then, we are in the curious position of knowing a great deal about writing without having done much self-examination about our own discipline-specific processes or discourse forms. Since we are setting up writing-across-the-curriculum programs and mapping the kinds of discourse, however, we owe it to ourselves, our students, and our colleagues to examine whether we are privileging our own discipline-specific writing features in our concepts of

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writing.[1]

My concern here is solely with academic writing and the discipline-specific features that occur within the larger, generic features of academic writing.[2] Discipline-specific features will have ramifications at all levels: the research physicist will pass along to students notions of writing that have been formed through his or her own research, while the philosopher will pass along different notions because of the nature of the discipline of philosophy. Students find it difficult enough to write without also having to puzzle unaided over the variations within academic writing; if there are variations, instead of pretending they do not exist, we must begin by clarifying to ourselves what they are and then proceed to help students understand them. While formal features may vary (in preferences for the third person or the passive, for

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1. Elaine Maimon discusses the mapping we need to do and the importance of avoiding English department provincialism in "Cinderella to Hercules: Demythologizing Writing Across the Curriculum," Journal of Basic Writing, 2 (1980), 3-11, or "Maps and Genres: Exploring Connections in the Arts and Sciences," in Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap, ed. Winifred Horner (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 110-125.

2. I accept here the definition of academic writing that Patricia Bizzell makes in "William Perry and Liberal Education," College English, 46 (1984), 447-454. Bizzell argues that academic writing is distinguished by its assumption that generalizations must be supported, facts documented, and methods made apparent--that knowledge, or claims about knowledge, must be open to question and therefore must be justified. The preference for rational argumentation rather than absolutism is to be found across disciplines.

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instance), formal features are visible enough to cause less trouble than the more internalized, implicit assumptions that exist within disciplines. Success in understanding these internal axiomatics, as James Kinneavy has called them, is crucial to successful writing in any field.[3] It is quite understandable that every discipline would privilege its own axiomatics, but we must become more explicit about what those axiomatics are.

The goal of this paper is to describe one feature of academic writing by which we may situate academic writing along a continuum with English department writing near one end and writing in the sciences near the other. This feature may be called problem definition. Given the academic's concern with rational argumentation, the subject of academic writing either already is or is soon turned into a problem before the writer proceeds.[4] Academic writing is distinguished by its being a problem-solving activity; no matter how tentative the solutions are, it is the problem-solving activity that generates academic writing. In this regard, writing about literature is a form of academic writing that shares the same assumptions as other academic writing and so exists on the same continuum. However,

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3. "Writing Across the Curriculum," Profession 83, (1983), pp. 13-20.

4. Here and throughout, I use the word "problem" in its sense of "puzzle" or "problematic" rather than "difficulty."

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problem-definition is the first step in problem-solving, and problem definition for the person writing a literary interpretation is at a different end of the continuum from that for a person writing within a more scientific field.[5]

Problem Definition

Stephen Toulmin writes that the scientific disciplines are best classified by the geneology of the problems they attempt to solve. Thus he defines science as a problem-solving activity and discovers its continuity in the continuity of its problem-solving goals.[6] For Toulmin, then, the crucial element of a scientific

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5. I choose examples from psychology because its concern with human behavior makes it the closest of the sciences and social sciences to our own concerns in literature. Analogies from the hard sciences are tempting (witness the proliferation of references to Thomas Kuhn) because they are relatively neat; the greater messiness of the biological and social sciences has made them less amenable to the kind of theory Thomas Kuhn erects from the history of physics. But that same messiness is our lot in the humanities, so we would do well to look at the biological and social sciences for our models.

6. This argument allows him to escape some of the problems Kuhn has encountered with his dichotomy between normal and revolutionary science. See Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), chapter 2. See also Larry Laudan, Progress and Its Problems: Towards a Theory of Scientific Growth (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977) for a discussion of the problem-solving nature of science.

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discipline is "a sufficiently agreed goal or ideal, in terms of which common outstanding problems can be identified."(p. 364) Diffuse and would-be disciplines, on the other hand, are characterized by "the absence of a clearly defined, generally agreed reservoir of disciplinary problems, so that conceptual innovations within them face no consistent critical tests and lack any continuing rational direction."(p.380)

Using this distinction, we can find well-defined problems both at the professional and at the undergraduate level in psychology.[7] As an example at the professional level, the following abstract of an article in a recent issue of Child Development, entitled "Child Health and Maltreatment," quite clearly shows its relation to an externally or communally perceived problem in the discipline:

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7. Toulmin, writing Human Understanding in 1971, saw psychology as having achieved only "would-be" status as a discipline; I assume this in no way hurts my argument for several reasons. Since Toulmin wrote, psychology has sorted out and discarded some of the rival theories that were then in contention, and in any case, within the subfields of psychology, such as child development or its subfield of attachment theory, there is more compactness that can be found in comparable subfields of the humanities. As stated earlier, I think we will see the characteristics of English department writing more clearly if we compare it to one of the messier sciences rather than one of the neat but non-human sciences like physics.

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> Children who are abused have been said to have more illnesses than children who are not maltreated. The relationship between abuse and illness has been hypothesized to function in 2 ways: (1) that abuse precedes the illnesses and children from abusive homes become ill because of the damaging environment they endure, or, conversely, (2) that the illnesses precede the abuse, with the fussy behavior of ill children eliciting abuse. This study was intended to clarify the temporal relationship between illnesses and maltreatment.[8]

The temporal relationship between illness and maltreatment is here represented as a problem that researchers in the field have already recognized, that needs to be solved, and that the authors will add their portion to solving.

But problem-solving is not restricted to professionals in psychology. The typical freshman psychology textbook is likely to contain, in chapter one, a discussion of how psychologists do research. One freshman psychology textbook tackles the subject of research problems by imagining a scenario in a college cafeteria; a student claims that psychotherapy is a waste of time, only to be met by five other voices disagreeing about whether therapy works or not. The authors then write, "How would a psychologist go about answering this question? The answer is that a researcher would not tackle such a broad and ill-defined

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8. Kathryn Sherrod, Susan O'Connor, Peter Vietze, and William Altemeier, "Child Health and Maltreatment," Child Development, 55 (1984), 1174.

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question."[9] After entering briefly into the complexity raised by the five voices (e.g., the different assumptions about the kinds of therapy, about the amount and degree of therapy needed by different people, and about what would constitute success), they then conclude, "The more you think about this topic, the more questions you ask. To do research on the effectiveness of psychotherapy, a psychologist has to take all these factors into account. And for this reason, researchers focus on a limited, well-defined set of questions." (p. 9) It is noteworthy that the authors in this freshman text can speak with such confidence about what might be well- vs. ill-defined and that they are able to characterize such questions or problems as agreed upon or external to the individual writer/researcher and his or her questions.

The freshman text is not simply gesturing in a direction irrelevant to undergraduates. It is quite possible to find an examination question like the following in a freshman psychology course: "Walter Mischel gave three reasons why we tend to overestimate the extent to which people have personality traits. Explain these reasons, and give three criticisms of Mischel which would lead us to believe that in fact at least some individuals have personality traits." Such a question requires the student to understand a problem that has been defined by a community of

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9. Sandra Scarr and James Vander Zanden, Understanding Psychology, 4th ed. (New York: Random House, 1984), p. 9.

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scientists. While the students are not required to solve the problem, they are required to understand its public definition and are constrained in writing by the public definition and the tentative solutions that have been offered by scientists.

Research in the sciences and social sciences, thus, may broadly be described as a problem-solving activity whose problems are (1) publicly discernible, (2) limited in number, (3) communal, and (4) generalizable:

1. The problems are publicly and readily discernible. Even those who can not entirely understand the intricacies of professional research on a problem can discern what the problem is and can locate others dealing with the same problem.

2. The problems within a field are limited in number. The developmental psychologist, for instance, may feel that several former problems are no longer problems and that perhaps four or five major problems are addressed by most of the research in the field. For example, researchers in the field of attachment want to study the causes, the stability, and the long term correlates of attachment status.

3. The problems are communal. Others in the field work on the same problems and tend to feel that they must do so to

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advance their careers. Problem-solving in the sciences, for this reason, always involves a context; probems are never decontextualized. Citation indexes and work in the sociology of science can readily substantiate this feature of the sciences.[10]

4. The problems are generalizable. A developmental psychologist interested in cognition or social development, for instance, may want to ask questions about the stability of a variety of behaviors over time, i.e., whether an individual who ranks high on a particular dimension at one age will also score high at some later age. This fundamental question about development can be posed with different aspects of cognitive or social functioning. Having defined a question to ask in relation to one set of data, the psychologist may then proceed to pose the same question for another set of data.

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10. For instance, see Derek J. de Solla Price, "Citation Measures of Hard Science, Soft Science, Technology, and Nonscience," in Communication Among Scientists and Engineers, ed. Carnot E. Nelson & Donald K. Pollock (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, Lexington Books, 1970), pp. 3-22. Harriet Zuckerman and Robert K. Merton have found that the higher rejection rates in journals in the humanities "may in part reflect differences in the extent of agreement on standards of scholarship in the disciplines," the sciences appearing to reach consent more often on journal submissions; see "Patterns of Evaluation in Science: Institutionalisation, Structure and Functions of the Referee System," Minerva 9 (1971), p. 77.

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Literary interpretation can broadly be considered a form of problem-solving also, particularly if we understand that in science or literature one can pursue problem-solving activities without necessarily arriving at solutions to the problems. One piece of evidence that literary scholars are engaged in problem-solving comes from the subjects on which they tend to publish. There is very little published recently, for instance, on Oliver Twist and a great deal on Wuthering Heights. The reason is that Wuthering Heights is problematic to the interpreter in a way that Oliver Twist is not.[11] This should not necessarily mean that Wuthering Heights is a greater or more universal novel than Oliver Twist, for certainly the latter has had a profound importance and still speaks profoundly to us. But critics and students tend to write about Wuthering Heights more often simply because it presents more problems; it is less transparent; it defies interpretation.

A second kind of evidence that literary interpretation thrives on problem-solving activity is that we often find critics saying that the literature we most value is that which is most difficult to interpret. As Frank Kermode has written of Wuthering Heights, "the only works we value enough to call classic are those which, as they demonstrate by surviving, are

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11. Oliver Twist is more likely to generate problems for the literary historian than for the literary interpreter, but my concern here is with interpretation.

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complex and indeterminate enough to allow us our necessary pluralities."[12] Even if Kermode is only partially right, he implies that we prize literary works whose interpretation compells us to take an active role in problem-solving. The reader-response theorists would agree with him.

There is also empirical evidence that literary interpretation thrives upon problem-solving. In an ingenious study of written literary interpretation as a form of argumentative discourse, Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor have found that literary arguments frequently fail as arguments but nevertheless persuade their readers because of their use of special literary topoi. These topoi, they find, may be reduced to one fundamental assumption: "that literature is complex and that to understand it requires patient unraveling, translating, decoding, interpreting, and analyzing."[13] Thus, the problem-solving activity of the literary interpreter consists of discovering, preserving, or creating complexity. Despite the existence of relatively non-problematic literature, we have built into our profession a reverence for the problematic which causes our interpretative activities to take on the character of

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12. "A Modern Way with the Classic," New Literary History, 5 (1974), 418.

13. "The Rhetoric of Literary Argument," unpublished paper delivered at The Pennsylvania State University Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, 1983, and Marie Secor, "Perelman's Loci," paper delivered at CCCC, March 1985.

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problem-solving--with the crucial stipulation that the problems neither can nor should ever be "solved" in such a way that literary texts lose their power to stimulate inquiry.

Thus we find literary interpretation to exist on the same continuum as other academic writing, but to be situated at a different point. Both scientists and literary interpreters devote their energy to problematic areas, rather than to matters upon which a consensus has been reached. However, what is problematic in literature is much harder to define than what is problematic in the sciences, partly because the scientist's goal is to solve or reduce problems while the literary interpreter's goal is to preserve problems, playing with them in such a way as to preserve the importance of the text.[14] If scientific (and social science) research problems are publicly discernible, finite in number, communally worked upon, and generalizable, as I have claimed, it should be clear that literary problems are not distinguished by any of those traits. In the case of Wuthering Heights, for instance, J. Hillis Miller writes:

> Though the many essays on the novel do not exist on a common axis of judgment, that is, though they do not even raise the same questions about the novel, much less give the same answers, each critic tends to claim that he has found something of importance which will indicate the right way to read the novel as a whole.

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14. Fahnestock and Secor comment upon this celebratory function of literary interpretation in "The Rhetoric of Literary Argument."

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> . . . The criticism of Wuthering Heights is characterized by the unusual degree of incoherence among the various explanations and by the way each takes some one element in the novel and extrapolates it toward a total explanation. The essays tend not to build on one another according to some ideal of progressive elucidation.[15] Each is exclusive.

In other words, literary problems are not publicly discernible, finite in number, communally worked upon, or generalizable.[16]

In a similar vein, Karl Kroeber has recently written of the state of literary study:

> Nobody really knows how the head of the English department at St. Joseph the Provider teaches seventeenth-century lyrics, or if the bright assistant professor with a Yale Ph.D. conveys to his students at Death Valley A&M true Hartmanesque doctrine. I don't know what Geoffrey Hartman is up to at Yale or even in this issue of PMLA. Our ignorance distinguishes us from scientists. Biochemists at Wisconsin know damn well what their colleagues at Stanford or MIT are up to, for science, as distinct from technological applications of it, is a flow of information. Humanism

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15. Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 49-50.

16. Stanley Fish's theory of "interpretive communities" might suggest that communities of interpreters limit and define the nature of problems so that they are not incoherent. But Fish's description of how communities work emphasizes not the communality of problems so much as the common tactic of differing from each other. See Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980). Moreover, Robert Scholes has recently criticized Fish's notion of "interpretive communities" as "vague, inconsistently applied, and unworkable" in Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), p. 150.

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is more a recurrence of sporadic outbreaks, like acne.[17]

Kroeber suggests, then, that literary problem-solving differs from what we have seen in psychology; while the psychologist might pursue a problem in professional research and then discuss the same problem (and examine students on it) in the undergraduate classroom, the literary scholar's classroom activities bear no necessary relation to professional problems and are not publicly discernible, communally worked on, or generalizable from one situation to another.

The ordinary undergraduate embarks upon interpretation of literature with a subject, but no sense of a problem at all. When faced with Wuthering Heights and little guidance from a teacher, for instance, students often have difficulty in mediating between two extremes; they tend to resort to plot summary or else some form of self-expression that appears to be triggered only very randomly by the text. Part of the student's problem may be explained from the perspective of hermeneutics: without an overarching interpretive theory or problem, the student will not notice the details of the novel that support that theory or bear relevance to that problem, and, conversely, without noticing those details, the student cannot arrive at a

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17. "The Evolution of Literary Study, 1883-1983," PMLA, 99 (1984), 332-333.

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theory or attempt to solve a problem. The student is left with only the blurriest notion of the novel--deprived of both overarching theory and an explanation of the details of the novel.

If, however, the student is presented with a well-defined problem (such as the problem in Wuthering Heights of explaining why Catherine marries Edgar, why Lockwood is narrator, or why Bronte didn't stop her story after Catherine's death), then the student has a vantage point from which to observe the details of the story and try to make sense of them. It does not, in a way, matter whether the problem is defined by the teacher or by the student's delving into criticism, and it probably does not matter whether the student realizes the force of Miller's insight into the incoherence of problems associated with Wuthering Heights. At least, the student has a vantage point from which to begin.

This vantage point, important as it is, still differs from the vantage point from which the scientist begins. The well-defined problem that we are now imagining the student of Wuthering Heights to have is both less communal (less publicly recognizable) and less generalizable than the scientist's. When students turn from Wuthering Heights to The Mill on the Floss or Phineas Redux, for instance, the problem defined for Wuthering Heights does little or nothing to help them discover a problem for other literary works. The inexperienced student begins anew and must once again have the teacher or published criticism help

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to define a problem so that the student may avoid the two undesirable extremes of recounting facts or imposing unfounded subjective notions on the text. A student in a course in child development might ask the same question of two different bodies of knowledge; for instance, he/she might ask how stable an attachment category is and then later in the course might ask how stable some personality trait or some intellectual trait is. The developmentalist repeats the question "Does this trait continue consistently over time?" in relation to a number of different bodies of data, whereas the student of the Victorian novel asks the question "Why did Catherine marry Edgar?" only once. The question does not represent some generalizable problem.

Both the student and the professional about to undertake to write literary interpretation are, thus, in quite a different position from the scientist. The psychologist working in the area of abused children has a range of problems to choose from and may decide to contribute his or her mite toward the problem of whether abuse precedes or succeeds illness. The literary interpreter, however, is in a very different position--knowing that problem-solving is the essence of interpretive activity but having, for a starting point, problems that are less public, less limited in number, less communally worked upon, and less generalizable than the problems the scientist begins with. The problems available to the literary interpreter are comparatively undefined.

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Causes of the Undefined Problem

We need to understand the causes of this lack of publicly well-defined problems if we are to understand the internal axiomatics of the discipline of English. Richard Ohmann has provided an explanation for the difference between literary and scientific problems. Science, he explains, is arranged in a hierarchy of theories linked to central questions or problems. Although specialists work upon very small parts of those problems, they do so for the sake of improving the generality and economy of theories. Ohmann writes that theory, in science, "is a device for reducing phenomena to their underlying similarities, for doing away with them as unique and special cases, for writing off a host of special circumstances and irregularities as simply not germane. . . . The intellectual holdings of a field are constantly being put in better order, subjected to more inclusive theories."[18]

Literary research, Ohmann argues, works upon different principles because we have no system of central principles by

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18. "Working in English in America, ca. 1965," in English in America: A Radical View of the Profession (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 9.

which to order and condense phenomena--nor would we want to. He continues, "A scientific theory achieves one of its ends when it succeeds in extricating the regularity from its penumbra of untidy detail. There is no need for the scientist as scientist to return to particulars once he has accounted for them. Our situation is quite different. We need generalization and theory, to be sure . . . But finally, our theories should be the servants, not even of facts, but of the experience that lies beneath facts. . . . At the end of literary study resides the work itself, in its complexity and uniqueness. We value the uniqueness above everything else, and wish to preserve it . . ."(p. 13).

A developmental psychologist interested in the problem of attachment, thus, might want to take a large number of instances of attachment problems and reduce them to several categories of problems; upon having successfully done so, the psychologist might find no further interest in the cases or initial data. Literary scholars, on the other hand, might be tempted to examine the multiple instances of courtship plots in the novel, then reduce them to several paradigmatic plots, but we would never then be willing to dismiss the literature itself (our initial data) and cease to read novels because we knew all there was to know about its paradigmatic shapes. We do not, after arriving at an interpretation of a problem in Wuthering Heights, discard the novel or cease to reinterpret it in the classroom and in professional articles; it cannot be reduced to a theory in the

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way the psychologist's data can be. So one cause of the undefined problem in literary interpretation lies in the nature of our initial data--literature itself.

Another cause is that we are inevitably forced into individualistic, rather than communal, forms of problem-solving activities when compared to our colleagues in the sciences. We may view our individualistic tendencies as sociologically or economically influenced; Stanley Fish, for instance, writes, "the activity that is most highly valued by the institution (even if it is often resisted) is more radically innovative. The greatest rewards of our profession are reserved for those who challenge the assumptions within which ordinary practices go on, not so much in order to eliminate the category of the ordinary but in order to redefine it and reshape its configurations."[19] Fish, then, would see the professional interpreter as working with the externally motivated need to be innovative--both in defining the problems and in offering solutions to them.

Robert Scholes, from a different perspective, applauds innovation as politically beneficial when he comments, "In an age of manipulation, when our students are in dire need of critical strength to resist the continuing assaults of all the media, the worst thing we can do is to foster in them an attitude of reverence before texts. . . . what is needed is a judicious

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19. Is There a Text in This Class?, p. 366.

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attitude: scrupulous to understand, alert to probe for blind spots and hidden agendas, and, finally, critical, questioning, skeptical."[20]

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20. Textual Power, p. 16.

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As representatives of different factions in current theory, Fish and Scholes reveal some of the causes (our romantic literary heritage, the pressure to publish or perish, the political fear of authoritarianism) underlying our professional commitment to individualistic rather than communal approaches to problem-solving. These tendencies within post-structuralist theory Edward Said (a Marxist) has called "oppositional" criticism: "The result as far as critical practice is concerned is that individualism of rhetoric in criticism and in the texts studied by the critic, are cultivated for their own sake, with the further result that writing is seen as deliberately aiming for alienation--the critic from other critics, from his readers, from the work he studies."[21] From current theory, then, we glimpse some of the socio-economic and ideological pressures toward individualism, and from Ohmann's explanation we glimpse some of the reasons why individualism is inherent in our problem-solving because of the literature itself.

We have limited options, then. We may deplore the tendency toward individualistic, private problem-defining and problem-solving in our discipline and look with nostalgia upon

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21. "Reflections on Recent American 'Left' Literary Criticism," in The Question of Textuality: Strategies of Reading in Contemporary American Criticism, ed. William V. Spanos, Paul A. Bove, and Daniel O'Hara (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982), p. 25. On the ways in which our romantic literary heritage has helped to create this oppositional thinking, see Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979).

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the scientists' more communal and public problem-solving. Or we may, if we so desire, consider the scientists to be deluded and slavish in their desire for public and communal problems and solutions. But no matter which direction our feelings tend toward, we ought to consider intellectually the implications of the position we are in. We belong to that part of the academy which is most individualistic in its definition of and procedures for working with problems, and at the same time, we have more influence than any other discipline upon how writing is taught. For that reason it is important for us to ask whether in teaching writing, we are at some point teaching the kind of well-defined problem-solving that is the preoccupation of a large part of the academy or whether we are privileging our own kind of undefined problems and thereby disabling students from learning how to write in other disciplines. We must, in short, look at the implications of the difference between literary and scientific (or social science) approaches to problem-definition.

Some Implications of the Disciplinary Differences in Problem Definition

There is a continuum within academia, then, as regards the kind and degree of definition in the problems that writers attempt to deal with. On that continuum, the sciences and social

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sciences are at one end and literary interpretation is somewhere at the other end with its relatively undefined problems. This should lead us to ask whether the writing we require in composition courses represents varying points across the continuum or whether composition course assignments tend to demand only one kind of problem definition.

I suggest that the problems students write about in composition courses are usually either at the same point on the continuum as literary problems or are even less defined. In writing about literature, writers are at least minimally constrained in their problem definition by the literary text. For example, critics have varied in the importance they attach in Wuthering Heights to the problem of the narrator, Heathcliff, or the two Catherine plots, and there are other potential problems that have not been frequently explored (such as the recurrent mention of dogs). But some other subjects simply have not arisen. The lack of cats in Wuthering Heights, for instance, virtually constrains interpreters not to write about cats in Wuthering Heights.[22] In the composition course, however, the

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22. Since writing this sentence, I have realized, with the ingenuity bred into all Ph.D.'s in literature, that cats may offer an interesting case of absence; while the dogs are present, the cat is a creature twice mentioned by the unreliable Lockwood and so might become a highly innovative problem for the literary interpreter writing about the unreliable narrators of Wuthering Heights. This, I trust, helps substantiate my claim that interpretive problems in literature are exceedingly private and non-communal in their definition.

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lack of constraining subject matter makes problem definition even more difficult.

For example, Knoblauch and Brannon give the following example of a freshman's paragraph:

> Jane, I imagine, is a wonderful friend. Being her brother, I don't qualify as a friend. We have a superficial friendship only to keep our parents' sanity. (To give an example, sitting at the dinner table, she will complain about the juicy thick steak that she is not eating. I will offer to take it off her hands for her. But rather than give it to her brother, she will march into the kitchen and throw it out.) This doesn't last long though. As soon as the folks are asleep, she starts in. Monday night football will have a tied score. There is five minutes left and the Steelers are on the ten yard line and all of sudden (sic), I am confronted with I Love Lucy. It is really too bad that she is so bright and talented and uses that as a weapon.[23]

Knoblauch and Brannon suggest that traditionalists might perceive the paragraph to be flawed because of "violation of ironclad principles of paragraph structure" such as "topic sentences, supporting examples, and appropriate conclusions," whereas Knoblauch and Brannon accept the flaws as part of the messiness involved in the student's "pursuit of a significance that matters--but that also persistently eludes him."(pp. 8-9) They admire the student's "growing awareness of intent" and his desire

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23. C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing (Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1984), p. 8.

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"to make valuable statements about the meaning of his own experience."(p. 12)

Their description of the two views that may be held about the student's paper, however, may be misleading. Part of the student's difficulty in groping for a significance that matters to him is that he has a subject, but no problem to begin with. As his writing-aloud transcipt makes clear, he gropes at times toward working on the divergent problems of why he and his sister are not friends, how his sister's behavior demonstrates that they are not friends, how her behavior has developed over time, how he reacts to her seeming hostility, and how she feels. The messiness of the student's groping toward meaning may well be an admirable sign of his growth, but it is also a sign of confusion in what he is being asked to do--so that while the student gropes with all the difficulty of finding or constructing meaning, he has to deal with the further difficulty of choosing and defining a problem to start with. Since he probably is too inexperienced to know that a well-defined problem will help him decide in which direction to go, he has no means of choosing one of the many directions he could go in. Thus, the messiness that Knoblauch and Brannon privilege contains an indeterminacy and lack of definition that goes beyond the lack of definition in writing about Wuthering Heights. The student writing about the narrator in Wuthering Heights will look at the narrator and probably ignore the problems of what the dogs are doing and why there are no cats in the novel, but the student writing about his

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relationship with his sister lacks even that kind of problem definition to help him block out the wealth of available but divergent thoughts in his head. Paradoxically, he may be constrained by the lack of constraints within his assignment.

Since Flower and Hayes have addressed the issue of constraints in the composing process, it may be illuminating at this point to look at an assignment they have given and the conclusions they draw from it about constraints. They gave expert and novice writers the following "problem": "write about your job for the readers of Seventeen magazine, 13-14 year-old girls."[24] Though they refer to it as a "problem," their assignment might better be called simply a subject or topic. The assignment contains no pre-defined problem--neither a publicly defined problem that others have recognized nor a problem that is generalizable to another writing situation. So the assignment requires the writer to create the problem in order to solve it. Flower and Hayes repeatedly stress that "writers build or represent such a problem to themselves, rather than 'find' it," that they "create the problem they solve."[25] The created problems they explore are unlike scientific problems in being sui generis--artifacts created for this particular writing situation,

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24. Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem," College Composition and Communication, 31 (1980), p. 23.

25. "The Cognition of Discovery," pp. 22-23.

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unconstrained by consideration of any public knowledge or debate on the subject of one's job in relation to 13-14 year-old girls.

The following passage from the protocol of one of their expert writers demonstrates how unconstrained the writer is by external pressures to define the problem one way rather than another and, instead, how free he is to be innovative. He is writing about his job as an English teacher:

> . . . For many of them English may be a favorite subject - doodling still - under audience, but for the wrong reasons - some of them will have wrong reasons in that English is good because its tidy - can be a neat tidy little girl - others turned off of it because it seems too prim. By God I can change that notion from them.[26]

On the continuum from well-defined to undefined problems, this writer is clearly working at the undefined end of the continuum, with a problem even more unconstrained by anything external than the problems of the narrator or the two Catherines plot in Wuthering Heights. It is no accident, I would argue, that the writer is an English teacher; he attacks the task of writing for Seventeen with the same delight in "radical innovation" that we may find in the theory and practice of someone like Stanley Fish, the same "oppositional" stance that Said finds characteristic of

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26. Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," College Composition and Communication, 32 (1981), p. 383.

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poststructuralist literary interpretation. The writer might have chosen, instead, to write an objective description of his job, to explain how an English teacher's day goes, to describe what is necessary for a successful English teacher, or any number of other possibilities. The problem he chooses to create, far from building upon any communal definition of English teachers, involves an almost adversarial stance; he is going to disabuse his audience of their simplistic, preconceived notions.

To remark upon the writer's almost adversarial concern with innovation is neither to imply that the writer is wrong in his approach nor to negate the insights that Flower and Hayes derive from their research. It suggests, however, that we need to be concerned not just with the process of composing, but with the multiple processes that occur in varying contexts. This point has been made by a number of writers who have argued that we need to know more about the writing process both in relation to the external demands made by the social situation in which writing occurs and to the formal or axiomatic features of the final written product.[27] Flower and Hayes' research on composing is based upon one kind of composing--composing with an undefined

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27. See, for instance, Jack Selzer, "The Composing Processes of an Engineer," College Composition and Communication, 34 (1983), 178-187, and "Exploring Options in Composing," College Composition and Communication, 35 (1984), 276-284; or Anne J. Herrington, "What Guides the Choices Writers Make? Examining Possible Connections Among Research Studies Grounded in Psychological Theories and Those in Sociological Theories," paper delivered at CCCC, March 1985.

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problem, with the writer forced to create a problem for him- or herself. Their research, then, is based upon a kind of composing that is typical of writing traditionally associated with English departments--whether writing interpretations of literature or personal essays. The insights from such research will be particularly valid, therefore, to describe the process of composing literary or personal essays. We simply do not have enough research to know how different the composing process may be for other kinds of writing--for scientific or social science writing, for instance, that begins with a pre-defined problem.

Flower and Hayes have discussed the difficulties writers face when they are forced to juggle the demands of knowledge, written speech, and the rhetorical problem; they convincingly liken writers to switchboard operators overwhelmed by too many in-coming calls and urge that plans and priorities can reduce the strain of juggling so many constraints.[28] However, constraints may not be the only source of difficulty--the lack of the constraints that come from a publicly well-defined problem can also create difficulties. When a topic is not amorphous and undefined, it may reduce for the writer the number of considerations to be dealt with; there will still be constraints, but some of the constraints may help the writer, rather than

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28. "The Dynamics of Composing: Making Plans and Juggling Constraints," in Cognitive Processes in Writing, ed. Lee Gregg and Erwin Steinberg (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1980), pp. 31-50.

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confuse or overwhelm him/her.

There are many implications, then, if there is a continuum within academic writing from defined to undefined problems: (1) Future research on composing needs to examine whether the pre-defined and well-defined problems of certain kinds of writing alter the nature of the composing process, possibly helping writers to invent, to see clearly, to extricate themselves from the messiness of multiple possibilities, and to construct texts that are meaningful both for the writer and for others. (2) Composition teachers and theorists need to ask whether many of our notions of good writing are built upon unrepresentative kinds of writing assignments--upon undefined assignments at the far end of the continuum from undefined to well-defined problems, assignments that privilege innovation or individualistic problem definition, rather than communal problem definition. (3) Writing-across-the-curriculum programs need to beware of provincial attitudes about writing--of privileging the individualistic and innovative kinds of problem definition that occur in writing about literary subjects, exciting as such subjects may be. (4) Teachers of literature need to help students learn how literary interpreters perceive and define what is problematic in a text before interpreting or writing about it; students (or other readers) can be helped by learning how to read with an interpretive problem in mind. (5) The literary portion of the profession may need, in its own theories about writing, to overcome some provincialism that comes from especially

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privileging indeterminacy--privileging the individualistic and innovative in problem definition and solution.

The kind of writing most closely associated, traditionally, with English departments can be a heady and exciting enterprise indeed. Compared to churning out efficient memos about administrative matters or writing up an experimental report in the APA format that has become second nature to the experimentalist, the creativity and freedom involved in writing about Wuthering Heights or one's relation to a sibling or one's job can be very satisfying. We want to offer that kind of satisfaction to all our students. We should not delude ourselves, however, into thinking that all writing should be done in the same way or conform to some preconceived standard. We must also find ways to clarify to ourselves and our students how scientific, social science, and non-academic writing depart from models of writing associated with English departments. The better we succeed in doing so, the more helpful we will be to our students and to colleagues in other disciplines; we may even discover that some of the excitement we have had from our kinds of writing can be had in other contexts also.

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